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***Written Testimony of Mark Waxenberg
Executive Director, Connecticut Education Association***

***Regarding HB 5900
'An Act Requiring More Transparency in Education'***

***Before the Government Administration and Elections Committee
February 11, 2013***

Good morning Senator Musto, Representative Jutila, members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of HB 5900 'An Act Requiring More Transparency in Education'.

My name is Mark Waxenberg and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Education Association. Our Association, known as CEA, represents over 40,000 Connecticut teachers, retired teachers and college students preparing to become teachers. Our mission includes advocating for legislation to benefit children, teachers and public education. CEA has, and will continue to be, an active partner in the movement to close the education gap in our state. It is because of CEA's commitment to close our State's achievement gap that we strongly support HB 5900.

As every education stakeholder and observer is keenly aware, our work is riddled by constantly shrinking resources amidst the increasingly more challenging work of closing the achievement gap. In this environment of shrinking resources, close scrutiny of the distribution and efficacy of dollars spent is even more critical to meeting our educational goals.

In the education reform legislation passed last year (PA12-116) the 2012 General Assembly included the Uniform System of Accounting and Chart of Accounts as a means for comparing education investments school-by-school.

This effort to better compare school budgeting has the potential of helping other schools spend more wisely. It reaches all public schools, including RESCs and charter schools. HB 5900 builds on this spirit of openness and transparency as a means to improve service delivery. Moreover, there are numerous special interests across the country seeking to divert public investment and decision making authority in education to privately managed firms and for-profit entities. Such diversion is not in the public's best interest, particularly if carried out without public scrutiny.

At this critical time in public education, the use of state tax dollars should be open for examination. The potential influence of outside groups should not proceed unchecked. And, the public should be aware of who may be influencing public policies, especially those affecting Connecticut's children.

The State Education Resource Center (formerly known as the Special Education Resource Center) was established in 2005 in Section 10-4q of the Connecticut State Statutes as an agency of State Board of Education. Its charge is to assist the board in the provision of programs and activities that will promote educational equity and excellence. However, since this time, certain processes followed by SERC have not been consistent with rules governing agencies of the state. Passage of HB 5900 would guarantee that SERC complies with our open bidding and sunshine laws strengthened by the legislature, as guided by this committee, in the aftermath of scandals involving former Governor Rowland. With passage of this bill, taxpayers and all public education stakeholders from parents to businesses would be ensured a clear view of how SERC is receiving and spending dollars that ultimately influence education policy in the state.

Clearly, it is the intent and direction of our State to make the funding, spending, and policy decisions of State agencies transparent. In 2009, the Connecticut State Contracting Board was established. As stated by the Board, their mission is to ensure that state contracting and procurement processes reflect the highest standards conducted in the most efficient manner possible.

You may hear today that some suspected SERC to have received private funding from undisclosed sources and that it awarded hundreds of thousands of dollars in no-bid contracts to vendors and consultants. It has been reported that some of these consultants and vendors assisted the State Department of Education in its efforts to develop and negotiate PA12-116 last year. Whether such suspicions come to be substantiated or not, it is the perception of concealment that does significant harm and compromises the public's trust.

The CEA believes that the intent of HB 5900 to ensure integrity and efficiency is consistent with the intent of the Connecticut State Contracting Board. Passage of HB 5900 would help ensure that taxpayers and education stakeholders alike are guaranteed the right to know how state dollars are being spent and decisions being made.

We urge you to pass this bill.